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**Troubling Children's Families: Who's Troubled and Why? Approaches to Inter-Cultural Dialogue**

**Jane Ribbens McCarthy and Val Gillies**

**ABSTRACT**

This article draws on multi-disciplinary perspectives to consider the need and the possibilities for inter-cultural dialogue concerning families that may be seen by some to be 'troubling'. Starting from the premise that 'troubles' are a 'normal' part of children's family lives, we consider the boundary between 'normal' troubles and troubles that are troubling (whether to family members or others). Such troubling families potentially indicate an intervention to prevent harm to less powerful family members (notably children). On what basis can such decisions be made in children's family lives, how can this question be answered across diverse cultural contexts, and are all answers inevitably subject to uncertainty? Such questions arguably re-frame and broaden existing debates about 'child maltreatment' across diverse cultural contexts. Beyond recognizing power dynamics, material inequalities, and historical and contemporary colonialism, we argue that attempts to answer the question on an empirical basis risk a form of neo-colonialism, since values inevitably permeate research and knowledge claims. We briefly exemplify such difficulties, examining psychological studies of childrearing in China, and the application of neuroscience to early childhood interventions in the UK. Turning to issues of values and moral relativism, we also question the possibility of an objective moral standard that avoids cultural imperialism, but ask whether cultural relativism is the only alternative position available. Here we briefly explore other possibilities in the space between 'facile' universalism and 'lazy' relativism (Jullien, 2008/2014). Such approaches bring into focus core philosophical and cultural questions about the possibilities for 'happiness', and for what it means to be a 'person', living in the social world. Throughout, we centralize theoretical and conceptual issues, drawing on the work of Jullien (2008/2014) to recognize the immense complexities inter-cultural dialogue entails in terms of language and communication.

**KEYWORDS**

Family troubles; child maltreatment; inter-cultural dialogue; cross-cultural childhoods; moral relativism; children's Rights; Avaita; Ubuntu; feminist ethics of care; personhood

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In this paper we centralize the desirability of dialogue in several respects: between academic sociological research focused on ‘mainstream’ family lives, and problem focused family research oriented to the concerns of social work and social policy; between multiple disciplines; and across diverse cultural contexts around the world. The first dialogue has driven previous work on the notion of ‘family troubles’ (Evans et al. 2017; Francis 2015; Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2013a; Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2018), and our discussion here takes this forward to focus on dialogue across diverse cultures, drawing upon work from multiple disciplines. Previous work (Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2013b) thus argued the importance of recognizing that ‘troubles’ – understood as changes and challenges - are a ‘normal’ part of children’s family lives, although obscured by notions and aspirations of idealized ‘childhood’ and ‘families’. This perspective inevitably disturbs the boundary between troubles considered ‘normal’ or ‘ordinary’, and troubles considered sufficiently ‘troubling’ – whether to family members themselves or to others – to warrant an intervention to prevent ‘harm’ to less powerful family members (in this case, children). In this paper, we centralize the question of how to determine where such a boundary may lie, and how to answer this question taking account of cultural diversities. This raises immense complexities and sensitivities, which we can only hint at in the space available here, but we suggest key considerations for the (renewed and urgent) development of such a dialogue, and encourage others to engage.

In our earlier work, with Carol-Ann Hooper (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2013b), we distinguished between approaches seeking to ‘normalise troubles’ and directions of argument that seek to ‘trouble the normal’ in children’s family lives. In developing our discussion here further in the light of cultural diversities, we raise questions about normalizing what might otherwise be seen (by those with divergent cultural assumptions) as troubling. But at the same time, our aim throughout is to seek a way of determining

when, and on what basis, the normal might be evaluated as troubling despite cultural diversities – or at least, to undertake some ground clearing work towards this aim. Jill Korbin puts this point succinctly in relation to the more specific concept of ‘child maltreatment’: ‘A fundamental challenge is not to confuse culture as child maltreatment or child maltreatment as culture’ (2013: 30). Korbin earlier proposed an important distinction between ‘cultural pluralism’ and ‘cultural relativism’ (1994, 2013). The latter is based on an *a priori* assumption that there is no basis for evaluating childrearing practices across cultures, since what is appropriate depends entirely on cultural context. Cultural pluralism, on the other hand, argues that there are multiple possible pathways to raise children in differing societies, but evaluations of the maltreatment of individual children can be made in the light of what is considered acceptable and appropriate within those contexts. However, as Korbin points out (1981), amongst various difficult complexities (2013), there is also the further question of *structural* disadvantages for whole categories of children (rather than individuals) in particular societies. This points to the central conundrum – how to take account of cultural diversities while acknowledging that there may be times when it seems important to define such differences as ‘troubling’, potentially requiring interventions, even across divergent cultural understandings.

Concepts of ‘child maltreatment’, ‘child abuse’, or ‘child wellbeing’ have received much attention from previous writers (e.g. Ben-Arieh et al. 2014; Featherstone et al. 2014; Ferguson 2004; Korbin and Krugman 2014; Thorpe 1994), sometimes extending to issues of cultural diversities (e.g. Kimborough-Melton 2014; Korbin 1981, 1994; Nadan et al. 2015; Palusci 2014), but this has not always led to discussion of what ‘maltreatment’ consists of (Parton 2014). And, while social work literature points to both moral and political issues about how to determine ‘child abuse’ (e.g. Munro 2002; Thorpe 1994), this work has largely focused within rather than across national contexts<sup>1</sup>. Our discussion here reframes these conceptual debates more broadly and more sociologically through the focus on ‘troubles’ as a ‘normal’ part of children’s family lives, and the bases on which such troubles might sometimes be found to be significantly ‘troubling’, to whom, and why. And we draw particularly on the work of the philosopher François Jullien (2008/2014), to consider how to approach the development of inter-cultural dialogue concerning such issues.

The idea that authorities might intervene in children’s family lives itself developed in particular contexts, notably affluent Anglophone and Western European societies since the nineteenth century. Such ‘outside’ interventions into family lives in these countries are largely based on professional judgments of

varying kinds (Broadhurst 2007), within variable policy contexts (Boddy et al. 2014), shaped by political, legal and moral frameworks (Ferguson 2004; Parton 2014; Webb 2006). The format of such interventions has undergone changes from initial beginnings in the work of (often religious) charitable societies, through the development of welfare states, to what might be seen as ‘moral panics’ about the protection and safeguarding of children, and the management of risk (Smith 2010), sometimes leading to highly bureaucratized and procedurally driven practices which elevate surveillance over care (Ferguson 2004; Lonne et al. 2009, 2013).

Such moral panics are intimately bound up with notions of ‘childhood’ as a special time for innocence and freedom from responsibility, with a moral imperative for the responsible ‘Adult’<sup>ii</sup> (normally mothers) to ensure the appropriate care of the ‘Child’ (Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2000), along with a total dedication by parents to ensure that children’s wellbeing is prioritized in all aspects of family life (Lareau 2011; Lee et al. 2014). Indeed, Cook (2017) suggests that ‘childhood’ itself is *constituted* by these moral entanglements. Nevertheless, the cultural embeddedness of this vision of ‘childhood’ is neglected precisely because it has become such a powerful focus for (unquestionable) moral responses and ideals. Furthermore, this moral overload is itself a significant source of anxiety and barrier to dialogue, as those concerned seek some certainty about how best to nurture children’s lives. Many such expectations become cloaked in professional and academic discourses giving an appearance of objectivity, with families described as ‘functional’ or ‘dysfunctional’, ‘healthy’ or ‘unhealthy’, ‘normative’ or ‘troubled’ (Crossley 2016a, 2016b; Somerville 2000; Vetere 2013) – terms which obscure their underpinnings in culturally shaped value judgments. Yet these ‘childhood’ ideals are rooted in the affluence and expectations of particular cultural contexts (Gillis 2009; Hendrick 2009), even while such notions are promulgated through international social policy (Ansell 2005; Boyden 1997). Such processes risk a cultural imperialism that impoverishes humanity through the loss of alternative cultural resources and possibilities concerning children’s lives. By seeking to move beyond such perspectives, light can be shed on their underpinning assumptions, enabling fresh insights concerning children’s lives around the globe, including (both more and less privileged) children in affluent Minority worlds. Indeed, Jullien (2008/2014) argues that Western European, and by extension Anglophone thought more generally, shares a particular common heritage in Aristotelean philosophy, which permeates European languages and experience. In these respects, then, our current discussion raises broad issues of post-colonial ontologies and epistemologies (issues we return to below).

Indeed, in contemporary childhood studies there are increasing efforts to understand children's lives in diverse global contexts (e.g. Katz 2004; Montgomery 2008; Punch 2016; Twum-Danso Imoh and Ames 2012; Wells 2009), requiring the flexibility to draw and redraw the parameters in focus depending on the purpose in hand, sometimes highlighting broad comparisons, but also focusing on specific locations. Some of this work includes discussion of how to assess 'harm', as seen for example, in relation to issues of child labour (Ansell 2005; Bourdillon 2006; Morrow and Boyden 2010) which is increasingly recognized to be a complex and often locally specific issue to evaluate in terms of its mixed impact on children's lives, their view of themselves, and their position in their families. Even child prostitution as a form of child labour has been discussed by the anthropologist Heather Montgomery (2014, 2015) as requiring a nuanced sensitivity to understand its significance in children's family lives in local contexts. From a broader perspective, however, international and local power dynamics, as well as material inequalities, historical and contemporary colonialism and nation building in various forms (Chen 2016), are inevitably central to such issues and how they are assessed – whether more or less negatively. But at the same time, people – including children – are active meaning-makers in their own right.

In this regard, people of all ages seek to make sense of the circumstances in which they find themselves using whatever cultural resources are to hand. This perspective invokes the contentious terms 'culture' and 'cultural difference', risking accusations of reifying 'culture' as fixed, with a life of its own, that may be harnessed towards political projects (Lukes 2008), including claims for the legitimisation of structural inequalities by more powerful groups within particular societies (Ncube 1998, discussed in Butler 2000). Yet, without some such notions, there is a risk of leaving out what cannot be accommodated within prevailing discourses and knowledge claims (Gressgård 2010). Here we use the term 'culture' to highlight systematically patterned ways of living and being in the world – always fluid and in motion – found in diverse contexts, that both shape, and are shaped by, the dynamics of power and agency in everyday interactions as well as institutionalized structures, through an uneven process resembling bricolage (Duncan 2011). Such cultural resources are deeply historically embedded<sup>iii</sup>, invoking philosophical and existential issues of what it means to be a person, to 'be' in the world, living alongside other persons, and to experience both happiness and suffering (Kleinman 2006). Ultimately the issues at stake concern how peoples around the globe can explore the different ways of *being* in the world and wonder at that, and act upon it where deemed necessary.

While cultural diversities with regard to child wellbeing, or harm, have long been recognized by anthropologists and social work writers, these matters become increasingly urgent as variable

understandings around the globe are unavoidably brought into confrontation, if not dialogue. In a globalizing world, transnational mobile knowledge flows impact on children's family lives in concrete ways (Thelen and Haukanes 2010), whether through movements of people or through economic dynamics, international policies and organisations. Family and child social policy is thus being changed by global processes from multiple directions, impacting on family and care practices and expectations, giving rise to 'confrontation, contradiction, and sometimes conflict' (Köngeter and Good Gingrich 2013: 138; and see Juozeliūnienė and Budginaitė, this issue).

In the contemporary global world, expectations of, and direct interventions in, the family lives of children are shaped by diverse actors, in a range of settings, from international legislation, public media and debates, to localised face to face interactions. Who is troubled by particular aspects of children's family lives, and on what grounds, highlights not only structural issues of power, but also assumptions and un-explicated value judgments, often obscured within knowledge claims. Across such a range of sites and actors, what are the underlying evaluative frameworks that define some families, and some family practices, as troubling, and to whom? In tackling this central question, we argue that a 'universal' answer cannot be provided empirically, and explore instead the possibilities for inter-cultural dialogue in regard to values, world views, and ideas of personhood, that may be relevant to evaluating children's family troubles.

But from the outset we need to explicate that nothing can be said or known outside of 'culture', recognizing the intricate inter-relationships between social actions and language (Ahearn 2012). Indeed, our questions, and the terms in which we consider them, are themselves embedded in the Anglophone academic contexts in which we find ourselves. There are no neat solutions to be found, only potential pathways to respectful and contextualized debate, the hope of recognizing further possibilities, and at times the need for political and ethical decisions to be made. We begin, then, by raising issues of language and concepts by which to frame any inter-cultural dialogue on troubling families.

### **Concepts and language**

Revealing core issues of language and concepts is a painstaking and profoundly challenging process.<sup>iv</sup> The difficulties this poses for inter-cultural dialogue have been particularly considered by the French philosopher Jullien (2008/2014), proposing specific ways of framing these debates. He argues that European philosophy developed a notion of '*the universal*', as an *a priori* assertion of something that is logically necessary, imperative, even without evidence being brought to bear [*'devoir-être'*], creating a

specifically European search for 'truth'. Instead, he proposes a focus on what is '*common*' – or shared – across cultures, in which 'universalising' becomes a process or way of thinking, rather than a search for a fixed 'truth'. At the same time, cultural perspectives may '*diverge*' in dynamic ways, revealing fresh perspectives, rather than static 'differences'. Inter-cultural dialogue is a political project with infinite possibilities, rooted in a *capacity for intelligibility*. But even if dialogue moves beyond European rules of argumentation, does 'dialogue' reflect an overemphasis on the 'virtue of the word' (ibid: 132)? Here, Jullien explores the subtleties of linguistic divergences while also arguing that language-thought gives rise to 'an indefinitely shareable possibility [*pouvoir être*] [of]... *universal communicability*' (ibid: 135, original emphasis). '[The human] reveals itself through those of its facets that are illuminated and deployed by multiple cultures as they patiently and intently probe each other...' (ibid: 171). At the same time, Jullien does not underestimate the incommensurability of language terms, or, more fundamentally, the divergences in thought systems underlying linguistic frameworks. Indeed, since meanings may diverge even when words have been correctly translated, Jullien argues for a never ending exploration of the implicit intelligibility of language-thought. Chinese language-thought, for example, has a 'side-ways' approach to the nature of 'categories', such as existence or non-existence, child/adult. While such static categories fundamentally underpin Aristotelean-based European language-thought, Chinese language-thought may be more expressive of flux, interaction and transformation, viewing such Aristotelean categories as sterile.

In regard to our present focus on diverse family troubles more specifically, Carrithers' anthropological discussion of '*vicissitudes*' and '*expectations*' is also usefully open-ended. Expectations may involve mundane features of anticipated regularity – the typically normal - or they may involve hopes and desires – what is normatively the way things should be - while vicissitudes involve the 'ruin of expectations' (2009: 3). When vicissitudes arise, rhetoric and culture are mobilized to work out what to think and how to act, but a risk arises that such responses 'may deepen the crisis, create more vicissitudes, and require yet further marshalling of ideas and interpretations' (ibid) – raising the possibility that interventions in children's family troubles may themselves sometimes create harm (Lonne et al, 2009; Thorpe, 1994). Shaped by power dynamics, along with the (culturally creative) meanings available through which to frame them, (implicit) expectations are crucial aspects of how people live their family lives, and how things may come to be understood to be troubling when expectations are not met, or are challenged or disrupted, perhaps violently (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2013b). Again, though, if the disruption is expected then it may not necessarily be found to be troubling,



or even disruptive; indeed, if it involves a move from one ‘ordered scene’ (ibid) to another, it may be captured more effectively as a transition.

Such considerations highlight issues about how to understand changes and challenges in children’s family lives. Such issues include the categories through which change is understood to have occurred, why it may be experienced as ‘challenging’, and whether what is occurring is experienced as ‘loss’ - and thus unwelcome or negative, perhaps ‘harmful’ – or potentially a form of ‘growth’<sup>vi</sup> - carrying positive connotations (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006). Indeed, change may often/generally entail much ambiguity and many elements of both. Craib (1994) argues that contemporary affluent societies have developed expectations of a trouble-free life, failing to recognize the inevitable ‘*disappointment*’ and suffering of human experience. This raises the likelihood that the idealization of ‘childhood’ itself creates unrealistic expectations of a special phase of life protected from troubles, in the process opening up new possibilities for the ruin of expectations, and failing to equip young people to cope with the (more or less) inevitable vicissitudes of existence. These conceptual discussions point to sociological issues of what is taken-for-granted by social actors, and the resources available (cultural and material) for responding to life’s vicissitudes.

‘Troubles’ may thus have a specifically sociological resonance (Francis 2015), but sociology is itself a political enterprise. Our argument so far seeks to recognize the political choices and cultural assumptions that may be present in the concepts used and the (linguistically framed) questions asked in regard to troubling families. We explore next some implications for knowledge production, to consider how empirical claims from developmental psychology have sought to assert universal certainties about when and how to evaluate children’s family lives and troubles. We exemplify our discussion by reference to studies of childrearing in China, and the application of ‘neuro-science’ to UK policies for early interventions in children’s family lives, drawing on our own recent areas of writing to demonstrate the dangers of seeking definitive empirical answers<sup>vii</sup> to the questions we are asking.

### **Empirical un/certainties?**

Developmental psychology is arguably the dominant paradigm for thinking about children’s well-being in Anglophone and Western European contexts, and is also crucial to the regulation of mothering/fathering (Burman 2016). In its origins, the discipline was largely based on a unilinear framework of maturational stages that ‘the child’ – as universal human subject – passes through, with major implications for how children’s ‘needs’ (Woodhead 1990) are understood. Based on this framework, an enormous body of

empirical work has been produced, embedded in and institutionalized by educational, health, and social work professions, as well as social policies, in ways that continue despite more critical insights from some academic psychologists (Burman, 2016).

Yet the empirical foundation for much of this work is based on WEIRD samples – i.e. from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic sections of societies (Henrich et al. 2010). Furthermore, it is predicated on culturally and historically specific notions of childhood and adulthood, in which individuality and independence constitute prized markers of adulthood, with such Minority world values being seen as the unquestioned basis for appropriate ‘outcomes’ of ‘child development’ (Ansell 2005; Brooker and Woodhead 2008). Yet when children are studied across diverse cultures through a Vygotskian theoretical framework of ‘mediated action’, their competencies at particular ages are found to vary greatly depending on their experiences and social expectations of children (Rogoff 2003), a theoretical framework that has been receiving increased attention<sup>viii</sup> (Burman 2016; Rapport and Overing 2007). Nevertheless, such alternative theories may not filter through to social policy, parenting classes, or professional training of teachers or social workers. Indeed, it is the institutionalization of classic developmental psychology that underpins international law and aid agencies (Burman 2005; Goodale 2009), including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Woodhead 2009), as well as everyday forms of governance in which family members monitor their own behavior (Burman 2016; Rose 1999). The critical psychologist Erica Burman thus argues that, as long as it maintains a unitary, general model of maturation, developmental psychology can only recognise difference in terms of:

...relative progress on a linear scale... Developmental psychology therefore functions as a tool of cultural imperialism through the reproduction of Western values and models within post-colonial societies. (2008: 293-4)

Such classic developmental psychology underpins much empirical work on children’s family lives in China, including studies by Chinese researchers, as we exemplify briefly here with reference to aspects of punishment and parental control. In such psychological comparative studies of parenting there may be – at best – only a preliminary discussion of translation processes, in considering the appropriateness of Anglophone research methodologies being applied in diverse contexts (e.g. Lansford et al. 2005). Even where psychological studies seek to be sensitive to cultural diversity, they may still import value judgments through their basic premises.

Barber et al. (2012), for example, explicitly sought to develop a scale for measuring psychological control by parents which would have resonance across diverse contexts. Their study concluded that detrimental effects of parental psychological control occurred ‘universally’, but their underlying and unquestioned theoretical concept referred to ‘*disrespect for individuality*’ which was theorised to damage the sense of ‘*self*’, failing to reflect upon the cultural embeddedness of such notions. Furthermore, as Lansford et al. (2005) discuss, ‘cultural normativeness’ may act as a moderator of parenting behaviours<sup>ix</sup>, and taking account of additional cultural features which cannot be included in such structured comparative studies raises enormous complexities. As Eisenberg et al. observe in relation to China: ‘...highly directive parenting... may not undermine children’s adjustment in collectivist cultures<sup>x</sup>, likely because such parenting is viewed as appropriate and in the child’s best interest’ (2009: 461).

On the other hand, a focus on ‘shame’ as a form of discipline can highlight specifically Chinese cultural values and perspectives. In China, shame carries important moral functions, promoting compliance with the norms of the collective (Choi and Han 2009; Helwig et al. 2014), and it continues to be advocated for moral education in (national) loyalty (Naftali 2016; Yan and Wang 2006; Yu 2007). In her research with young children’s families in Taiwan, Fung (1999) drew on Schneider’s (1977) theoretical framework to distinguish between shame as disgrace and shame as discretion - the latter referring to the learning of ethical and social rules. Fung’s ethnography highlighted how shaming occurred in nuanced everyday interactions. Compared with the view of shame apparent in Anglophone psychological literature (e.g. Barish 2009; Soenens and Beyers 2012), in which shame is theorized as a form of psychological control (universally) damaging to individuality and long-term development, Fung’s study points to parenting practices understood to be expressing a particular understanding of shame, seen as key to participation in harmonious social life.

Structured psychological studies thus regularly fail to heed warnings against viewing specific cultural practices as a ‘toolkit’ of resources (Lukes 2008: 106). Jullien (2008/2014) cautions against a conception of cultural diversities as a form of global supermarket, in which the shopper can select from alternative products. In such a supermarket, he suggests, the categories and their organisation are all predetermined in line with European categories of reason. Chinese scholars may thus seek erroneously to develop a synthesis of Chinese and Western cultures, thinking about differences only in Western terms even when expressing themselves in Chinese (and see also Goh 2011). These considerations are readily apparent in Anglophone quantitative child psychology which applies Minority world

preoccupations, theories and concepts, to develop research studies around the globe, including China (Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2017b). Rather, child care practices must be viewed holistically (Korbin 1994), with disciplinary tactics understood as ‘packaged variables’ (Parke 2002: 596).

Indeed, the cultural contexts relevant to children’s family lives are always dynamic, multi-layered and multi-sited, cross-cut by multiple diversities. In contemporary Chinese children’s family lives, these include: the specific ways in which childhood itself is institutionalized as a legal and social structure (Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2017a); the changing but still core significance of the complex notion of filial piety shaping appropriate inter-generational relationships; the centrality of family and social networks for material protection and survival; the historical and contemporary significance of educational pressures; ancient philosophies of childhood oriented to ideas of collective personhood; and an emphasis on the moral value of self-cultivation towards becoming an acceptable human being; all underpinned by values of stability, harmony and loyalty (Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2017b). All of these themes, in more recent times, have also encountered ideas from affluent Anglophone and Western European societies which may be seen as a route towards prosperity and success (Fong 2004).

This discussion thus highlights a double jeopardy in terms of *what is left out* by Anglophone research based in a developmental psychology that occludes cultural contexts, and *what is included* in terms of unquestioned value assumptions: ‘Our psychological idiom affects and is affected by our moral one. It often substitutes for—recodes—it,’ (Crapanzano, 2013: 537).

In recent years, psychologists’ search for definitive ‘truths’ has emphasized the biological mechanisms thought to underlie children’s optimal development, focusing on the arguably detrimental effects of insensitive parenting on infant brains. As part of what has been termed a general ‘scientisation of parenting’ (Faircloth 2010; Ramaekers & Suissa 2011) in Anglophone contexts, policy and practice accounts are increasingly concerned with the formation of ‘brain architecture’ during the first years on the basis that the ‘wrong type of parenting and other adverse experiences can have a profound effect on how children are emotionally wired’ (The Allen Report 2011: xiii). ‘Poor quality’ of mothering received during this ‘critical window’ of brain development is argued to be linked to a range of personal and public troubles including what may be defined as mental health difficulties, poor social and emotional skills, educational underachievement and anti-social behavior, leading to increased risk of unemployment, poverty and crime in later life. In the UK, this biologised theorizing has underpinned an

emphasis on early years intervention, enacted through the allocation of professionals to disadvantaged mothers of young children to train them in 'parenting skills'. Normative structures of good parenting are made apparently solid and unquestionable through this biological narrative, while the resulting perception of urgency and risk generates an imperative to rapid action. Professionals are urged to intervene before a process of neural hardwiring occurs, on the grounds that 'two (years old) is too late' (Gillies et al. 2017: 48).

But rather than originating from the discipline of neuroscience, biologised models of early intervention are largely derived from psychoanalytic theorizing around infant attachment in the 1950s, which developed in the contexts of post-war Europe and the USA (Lamb 2014). Bowlby's original formulation of attachment theory attracted considerable criticism for its essentialist idealisation of mothering, methodological flaws and lack of precision (Rutter 1972; Schaffer and Emerson 1964; Wootton 1959). However, while attachment theory fell from favour among policy makers and practitioners during the 1970s and 80s, it re-emerged in the 1990s and was bolstered with a hard science rationale drawn from a neuropsychanalysis movement which seeks to combine insights from neuroscience and psychodynamic theory (Gillies et al. 2017).

A huge volume of research has since been conducted into the broad concept of attachment, but the findings are complex and highly variable (e.g. see Thomson 2008). Based on Ainsworth's original (1970s) 'Strange Situation Test', infants' attachment is classified as secure, avoidant-insecure, resistant-insecure, or disorganised. Not only is there considerable instability in these categorisations over time, international studies point to differences across different populations. For example, high numbers of resistantly-attached infants are found in Indonesia, Japan and the kibbutzim of Israel (van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg 1988; Zevalkink et al. 1999), while disorganised attachment is frequently found in parts of Africa and Chile (Tomlinson et al. 2005; True et al. 2001; Waters and Valenzuela 1999). This likely reflects the variable ways children are raised in different cultures, but attachment research also highlights the significance of many other factors including social environment and characteristics of the child, such as temperament and genetic polymorphisms (Bernier and Meins 2008; Clarke et al. 2013; Granqvist et al 2017). Indeed, Meins (2014) argues that parent-child interaction is not a particularly good predictor of attachment.

Thus, while some leading attachment theorists still seek to assert its universality from an evolutionary perspective, there have been recent calls for a fundamental rethink in relation to the diversity of cultural

contexts in which children live (Ottoman and Keller 2014). This includes such basic questions as: how attachment is culturally defined in the first place (such that any associated sense of security may depend on ‘the availability and reliability of a caregiving environment rather than ... individual attachment relationships – Keller, 2014: 14); the requirement to recognise indigenous assessments of (variable) caregiving arrangements; and the middle class Minority world assumptions underpinning empirical research (Keller 2014). Given such basic diversities, any view of ‘secure attachment’ as a ‘universal’ need<sup>xi</sup> would seem to be heavily compromised. Indeed, leading child health and development theorists have drawn attention to the erroneous assumptions characterizing efforts to universalize attachment categories, cautioning that such ‘misapplications may violate children’s and parents’ human rights and represent discriminatory practice against minorities in need of social and material support’ (Granqvist et al 2017). Moreover, attachment as a theory cannot as yet claim an established basis in neuroscience, despite the biologised language used by its advocates. As Rose and Rose (2016) point out, there are no biomarkers that indicate whether a baby is or is not attached, let alone correlates for categories of attachment. As such any association between poor mother infant ‘attunement’ and brain damage is highly speculative.

Aside from the complex and contested terrain of attachment theory, concern has centred on the biochemical impact of stress on infants’ developing brains. Cortisol is steroid hormone released in response to stress and is commonly identified within policy and practice literature as a key mechanism inhibiting infant brain growth. Experiencing stress while pregnant and/or practicing insufficiently attentive parenting is commonly viewed as endangering normal development. But in highlighting the risks of raised cortisol levels, early interventionists largely extrapolate from animal experiments suggesting that high cortisol triggers negative physiological and neurobiological impacts. As White and Wastell (2015) point out, this body of research has produced contradictory findings and limited agreed knowledge, with some scientists suggesting high cortisol may actually foster resilience in monkeys (Lyons and Parker 2007). Human studies have found that post-traumatic stress disorder can impact on brain structures, but this evidence comes from war veterans rather than infants (White and Wastell 2015) and did not involve measuring cortisol. And, indeed, it would seem unremarkable that major life experiences would be associated with embodied change.

While abusive and/ or neglectful parenting may be the source of great psychological injury to a child, there are no unambiguous neural or biomolecular markers through which this can be measured. Indeed, biological language can effectively mask fundamental moral and ethical questions underpinning

evaluations of child wellbeing, closing down debates and insights in the process. As Featherstone et al. (2014) note, neuro-scientised accounts have infused child protection social work in the UK, driving a muscular interventionism that has seen accelerating numbers of children forcibly removed from their families to eradicate perceived risks posed by their parents. This suggests a discourse of biological damage may be generating an *illusion of certainty* while facilitating what many might view as grievous harm.

### **Un/certain value frameworks?**

These examples illustrate Burman's observation that, 'normative descriptions provided by developmental psychology slip into naturalised prescriptions... fuelled by the appeal to biology and evolution' (2016: 4). As Rutter points out, in his discussion of the important role of 'good science' in understanding family troubles, 'context may be critical, whereby variables and their effects can acquire their meaning because of their social effects' (2013: 50). But if science cannot realistically provide adequate 'universal' 'truths' about what may be troubling about children's family lives and how to respond, does this necessarily leave us in a position of cultural relativism?

Both an *a priori* version of cultural relativism, as well as contextualized perspectives such as cultural pluralism (Korbin, 1981), suggest that children's family troubles can only be approached through what is normative in their localized contexts and cultural worlds. Yet the larger question remains, whether there is any basis for regarding family practices as troubling/harmful/a source of suffering to children in the face of cultural difference, *regardless* of whether it is normative within a cultural group. Is there any way forward through establishing an 'objective' moral framework to answer these questions? Or do such frameworks also involve an (unacceptable) power dynamic such as an implicit postcolonial imperialism based on the epistemologies of the North (Connell 2007; Santos 2014, discussed by Bhambra and Santos 2017)?

Here we enter the field of value pluralism and moral relativism (Lukes 2008), which has seen something of a resurgence of interest amongst anthropologists in recent years (e.g. special issue of *Anthropological Theory* 2014; Csordas 2013; Fassin 2008; Goodale 2009). The terms, 'values' and 'morals', are debatable but interlinked, including: 'types of rights, obligations and duties, as well as morally desirable ends' (Wong 2014: 337). Such values are an integral part of the everyday business of living with children, with even the small, taken-for-granted processes of daily family lives being embedded in much bigger

philosophical issues about what it means to be a child, and a person living in society (Ribbens 1994): ‘...values involve human goals and answers to Tolstoy’s question, “What shall we do and how shall we live?” (Lukes 2008: 89). Values are also abstract, but only really convey meaning when they become more specific, with more information – when they are ‘thicker’ rather than ‘thinner’ (ibid).

Anthropologists have argued that there is a common tendency across cultural contexts for peoples to regard ‘their own’ particular moral frameworks as carrying a form of ‘truth’:

The basic folk assumption, which provides a grounding for an anthropology of morality, is that there is an objective moral charter defining what is good, and that behavior that is moral behavior per se is right, binding and ought to be done because it is in the service of those objective goods. (Shweder and Menon 2014: 362)

Nevertheless, Shweder and Menon suggest, while such a *sense* of objective morality may be a common feature of social life, the *content* of this morality varies greatly, raising the question whether there is any ‘objective’ reference point by which to prioritise one moral position over another. And while (Anglophone and Western European) philosophers and some anthropologists have struggled hard to find such a basis for moral ‘truth’, Shweder and Menon argue that such a truth has yet to be found that stands outside of culturally based world views, and without reflecting relationships of power. But does this leave us only with the position of moral subjectivists, where moral disagreements are seen in terms of competitive power struggles?

We suggest that this is an overly pessimistic conclusion to draw. ‘I call myself a relativist, but not an ‘anything goes’ relativist.’ (Wong 2014: 345). While values that do not correspond are mutually exclusive and thus non-negotiable, this does not mean that is all there is to be said, or we fall into a simplistic dichotomy between ‘facile universalism’ and ‘lazy relativism’ (Jullien 2014: 96). Furthermore, the stark categorical alternatives of objectivist or subjectivist, universalist or relativist, themselves also reflect the binary point of view of much Anglophone and Western European thinking. The postcolonial project itself requires the capacity to re-think what may be meant by truth or reality, since reality is ‘first and foremost an ethical and political problem’ (Savransky 2017: 23), requiring a ‘decolonial speculative project’ (ibid: 19). Alternative epistemologies can include such indigenous Canadian concepts as ‘two-eyed seeing’ (which may extend to plural ways of seeing), encompassing different ways of knowing, that people may learn to ‘see’ *simultaneously* in order to benefit from the strengths of each (discussed by Goulding et al. 2016). This also resonates with nuanced Chinese dialectical thinking which provides



scope for accepting ‘contradictions’, differing from Hegelian dialectical thinking in which a resolution is sought (Peng and Nisbett 1999, discussed by Choi and Choi 2002).

Shweder’s earlier work thus set out different ways of ‘seeing’ suffering (or what we may frame as ‘troubles’ of varying degrees), made intelligible through tracing its origins to some ‘order of reality responsible’ (Shweder et al. 1997: 121). Drawing on empirical work from across the globe, these authors suggest three main causal ontologies for making sense of suffering: bio-medical, interpersonal, and moral, each with implications for ethical discourses. Furthermore, in seeking to explore the ‘local moral worlds’ (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991: 296) of peoples across the globe, Shweder et al. argue that there are multiple moral discourses available to encompass the complexity of human experience, but these are also ‘rationally limited’ (Shweder et al. 1997: 141), the three main discourses being centred on autonomy, community and divinity. Such different ways of ‘seeing’ suffering and moral responses feed directly into our questions about what may be found troubling about children’s family lives, what might be the origins of such troubles, who is held accountable, and what is an appropriate response.

### **Developing frameworks for dialogue**

In terms of the diverse moral perspectives relevant to family troubles, one theme particularly stands out: pervasive and deeply significant divergent understandings of personhood and the self which may sometimes co-exist but may also be differentially distributed across and within cultural contexts (e.g. Choi and Han 2009; Oyserman et al. 2002; Ribbens McCarthy 2012; Triandis 1987). These may in turn underpin differing moral perspectives – as seen with Shweder’s distinction between principles of autonomy, community and divinity. Jullien (2008/2014) writes of divergent ‘cultural logics’ of ‘*emancipation*’ (of individuals) and ‘*integration*’ (affiliation) which may underpin different moral systems and values. The former underpins Anglophone understandings of human Rights, but he argues that neither Indian nor Chinese cultures recognize emancipation in these terms. Nevertheless, he also suggests that these differing cultural logics can be brought to bear in developing an inter-cultural dialogue, and we suggest this framework may be usefully applied, and perhaps elaborated, in relation to troubling families. Here we can only sketch some indicators for themes and models that might be usefully and perhaps provocatively brought into such conversations.

In contemporary global social policies and discourses, the dominant legal framework for evaluating children’s family troubles is that of Rights, enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 (UNCRC). This Convention carries global weight, having been ratified by almost every

country in the world, although it is notable that there is also a specifically African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Organisation of African Unity, 1990). This Charter takes account of traditional African customs, notably the responsibilities of children towards their communities (resonating with the theme of integration). Yet the UNCRC has become the dominant paradigm in the work of international aid agencies and legislation, potentially disregarding its basis in Anglophone and Western European perspectives. Such Minority worlds assumptions entail: personhood as resting in ‘the individual’<sup>xii</sup>; the valuing of autonomy and self-determination; conceptions of ‘the child’ and their proper position in ‘family life’; along with deep tensions in the meaning of Rights for children (Ansell 2005; Holzscheiter 2010; Lansdown 2005; and discussed further in Ribbens McCarthy 2013). ‘The hidden agenda would appear to be one of changing the children rearing practices of millions of caregivers across the world, using decontextualized and abstract ‘human rights’ formulations as a justification....’ (Thorpe 1994:202).

At the same time, the UNCRC constitutes a legal document (Montgomery 2010), arguably providing particular (stronger/more certain/categorical?) tools for decision-making, which may sometimes be productive in diverse contexts. A Rights perspective thus has both advantages and disadvantages, the latter stemming particularly from an over-reaching towards universalism. Nevertheless Jullien argues that, while human Rights express a particular ideology, the concept has a capacity to transcend culture, as an abstract notion that depends simply on having been born, providing ‘an irreplaceable instrument for saying “no” and for protesting’ (2008/2014: 114). Importantly, his proposal is for the usefulness of a Rights perspective as a basis for *an appeal* rather than *a truth*, to legitimize a justified struggle. Yet, we suggest, there are two major issues in applying this view to children’s Rights, since understandings of both ‘the being who was born’ (ibid) and what it means to be ‘a child’ are culturally variable.

Kapur (2014) also dissects the limitations of the Rights framework without rejecting it in entirety, highlighting its potential political power. Yet she argues for a ‘turning away’ from this framework, centred as it is on a liberal view of the self as constituted by the body, and a ‘turning towards’ non-liberal perspectives rooted in other cultural histories. She suggests that a Rights framework is inadequate in its understanding of human happiness, which it mistakenly grounds in wealth and health. Kapur explores instead the Indian framework of non-dualism, *Advaita*, to exemplify ‘other ways of pursuing freedom and happiness that do not remain confined to liberal thought more generally or human rights more specifically’ (2014: 35). Advaita invokes both spirituality and ‘a [non-divisible] self that cannot be captured within a liberal imaginary’ (ibid: 43), being centred on reflection rather than

embodied rationality. Such reflection can provide a 'conscious space... the space of the seer or observer from where perception and discernment takes place' (ibid:38). From this space of reflection, social labels and experiences can be observed and resolved. Furthermore, within this framework happiness is a discovery rather than an achievement, and it is the self (as awareness) rather than the body that needs liberating – without denying that the body requires 'basic needs and sustenance' (ibid:41). It thus becomes possible to 'think in terms of emancipation through a deeper engagement with different knowledge paradigms, their metaphysical locations, and goals' (ibid:43). In these ways, spirituality also becomes relevant, rather than simple binaries of emancipation and integration, or autonomy and community.

From the multiple locations of African histories, there is also the perspective of *Ubuntu*, a complex notion articulated in variable ways in different contexts (Connell 2007; Praeg 2008), but found in African languages throughout the continent. A central theme is that humanity/being human occurs through co-creation with others, rather than being embedded in individuality: 'a person is only a person because of other people' (Boon 2007 p.26, cited in Nkuna 2013), or 'I am because we are one' (Nel 2008:141). This inherently relational understanding of identity and personhood thus conveys the profound connectedness of human existence. At the same time, Eze (2008) argues both community and individuality are valued within *Ubuntu*, since they are mutually constitutive. The central moral focus, then, is on harmony and sharing, and it is within this framework that a specifically African understanding of childhood is embedded.

An alternative Anglophone approach to evaluating children's family troubles, which resonates with these relational views of personhood (Donchin 2001; MacKenzie and Stoljar 2000), is that of the ethics of care, developed through the work of feminists from multiple disciplines (e.g. Gilligan 1982; Graham 1983; Noddings 1984; Tronto 1993). Care is theorized always to be a feature of relationships, 'produced inter-subjectively in relation, and through practice' (Raghuram 2016: 515). Further, 'The context of care and local contingency are therefore crucial in defining care and care ethics' (ibid: 520), suggesting that there is much scope for 'speaking back' to care ethics from lived experiences of care in (diverse) local contexts<sup>xiii</sup>. The ethics of care approach has been recognised for its potential value to the ethics of social research methods (Edwards and Mauthner 2002) and social work practice (Lonne et al. 2013; Parton 2003; Webb 2006).

These various frameworks resonate with Connell's discussion of 'Southern Theory' more broadly in contemporary social sciences, arguing the need for theoretical developments, as well as experience and data, that originate elsewhere than the 'North Atlantic hegemony' (2014: 289). Similarly, Kesby et al. (2006) call for a global childhood studies that avoids just 'adding in' the missing children from countries and contexts currently omitted. Nevertheless there are also clear dangers in modeling and conversing about 'diversities' drawing on the sorts of theoretical frameworks outlined above, since they risk the production of simplistic accounts (Praeg 2008). Yet where else do we begin to see what may be 'unthought' within 'our own' culturally myopic perspectives? 'When I acknowledge the otherness of the other, the fact that they cannot simply be reduced to the way I understand the world, I find myself in an *ethical* encounter' (Praeg 2008: 376, original emphasis).

In briefly discussing such variable moral, social and existential frameworks, then, our purpose is to offer contingent tools for dialogue, rather than definitive perspectives or philosophies. These are not equivalent alternatives, but can be used to exemplify how each brings into relief particular features of human experience and *being* in the world. In this way, the divergent existential assumptions and moral values embedded in each framework can be explicated and debated for its implications for the evaluation of children's family troubles in diverse contexts. While moral cost-benefit analyses have their drawbacks (Lukes 2008), in thinking through each perspective we may find that each has strengths and limitations, and elements to be valued about both. In this sense, moral frameworks might be considered for their '*coherence*' and '*intelligibility*' in Jullien's terms (2008/2014) rather than their '*truth*' and objective standing.

## CONCLUSIONS

The questions raised in this discussion have no easy answers, whether empirical or philosophical; indeed, the questions themselves, and the terms in which we have sought to answer them, are rooted in Western European and Anglophone histories of thought and knowledge. In considering the evaluation of children's family troubles across diverse cultures, and in the light of Minority world failures to see the ethnocentrism and implicit value judgments in much empirical work on children's lives, we argue the need for humility in seeking any *a priori* universal empirical certainties, or 'test' of morality in Kantian terms (Lukes 2008). Such seeking for certainties closes down dialogue, and reproduces particular cultural assumptions and values in the context of historical and contemporary international power structures. Yet there is scope for moving beyond a stark choice between universalism and moral relativism, through inter-cultural dialogue based on, 'an anthropology of moralities that enables the

recognition of the plurality and creativity of moral discourses all over the world and simultaneously keeps them in dialogue' (Heintz 2009: 2). Such an inter-cultural dialogue may also enable Burman's (2016) vision of fresh approaches to developmental psychology once the search for unitary universal truths is relinquished, as well as Woodhead's (2009) concern to keep open a space for considering change and transition in the lives of children and young people.

Careful communication might thus promise more caution about what facts can and cannot do for us in evaluating troubling family practices. In his discussion of the meaning of 'the best interests of the child' (a key element of the UNCRC), Freeman draws on the work of Arendt to draw attention to the ways in which values are embedded within different 'communities of judgment'. While this leads on to more questions and complexities requiring dialogue between 'communities', Freeman suggests a dialogue about values may nevertheless lead to an 'enlarged common sense' (2007: 39). Jullien also points to the possibilities of mutual comprehension through dialogue, but is more circumspect about what may be achieved, arguing for wisdom rather than compromise, providing 'glimpses... of the unthought' (ibid: 153). To achieve such possibilities depends upon a strong (highly demanding) version of dialogue, requiring both languages to be heard simultaneously, to avoid loading the dice and distorting the dialogue: 'I consider translation to be the only possible ethic of the 'global' work to come' (ibid: 161). And then there are the further questions about who exactly may be involved in such dialogues and new forms of knowledge production (Connell 2014). But going beyond the obsessive search for the certainties of truth/falsity opens up an infinite vista of unfolding cultural resources, currently being sterilized, hidden or travestied under globalized normativity. At the same time, there is further work required to consider the implications of such debates in relation to variable understandings of 'childhood' and 'the child', while it is also important to bear in mind what is common about childhoods in diverse contexts (Twum-Danso Imoh 2016a).

The implications of the issues raised here for professions at the front line of decision making in regard to children's family troubles, have yet to be brought into focus and considered through inter-cultural dialogue. As Bauman argues, 'The uncertainty which haunts social work is nothing more nor nothing less than the uncertainty endemic to moral responsibility' (2000: 10). Similarly, Parton (1998) argues for recognition of the inevitable uncertainties and ambiguities at the heart of social work to be embraced, while Lonne et al. point out 'the competing ideologies that masquerade as alternative certainties' (2013: 1644). Instead, they argue, the ethical complexities of social work require a focus on 'practical wisdom

and contextual appreciation' (ibid: 1641). Yet, in the context of international social work standards and education, the development of inter-cultural dialogue addressing such uncertainties has barely begun (An et al. 2016; Dominelli and Ioakimidis 2017; Gray 2005, 2010; Healy 2007), even while Anglophone approaches are being emulated by other countries around the world (Melton 2009).

We have suggested that understanding the bases on which children's family lives in diverse contexts may be found to be troubling, and developing principles and practices of how to respond, are highly complex and potentially fraught. At the present time, the construction of childhood in Anglophone and Western European societies means that children's family troubles, in particular, may arouse strong moral concerns and a desire to assert certainty, a view reflected in international policies and legislation. We have here argued the unsound base available for making such universalist, objectivist assertions, whether empirical or moral. And we have suggested that one way of encouraging dialogue around children's family troubles may be to consider the moral frameworks available – such as Minority world frameworks of children's Rights, Indian perspectives of Advaita, African concepts of Ubuntu, or Anglophone feminist ethics of care – and to explicate their strengths and limitations, including their underlying values, conceptions of personhood, and world views.

But ultimately it may also be necessary to confront value conflicts that cannot be reconciled, over what constitutes 'harm' in children's lives, to make the best attempt we can to make moral decisions in situations of uncertainty, competing priorities, and local complexities. Indeed, attending to 'local moral worlds' and developing dialogues in localized communities and neighbourhoods is arguably one important way forward (Harris-Short 2003; Korbin 1994; Lonne et al. 2009; Nadan et al. 2015; Twum-Danso Imoh 2016b). But in developing a post-colonial inter-cultural dialogue, it is crucial to explicate the moral, philosophical and political choices we seek to assert, in endorsing certain values and versions of human 'being' over others, and defining aspects of children's family lives as incontrovertibly troubling. And to maintain the dialogue.

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<sup>i</sup> Where cross-national comparisons are made, they generally focus on affluent Anglophone or European nations (e.g. Boddy et al. 2014; Lonne et al. 2009)

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- <sup>ii</sup> Ribbens McCarthy et al. used capitals to denote 'Adult' and 'Child' to refer to socially structured and generalised moral positions in which individuals are placed.
- <sup>iii</sup> And see Rush and Ibrahim in this special section, for a detailed example of the historical, religious, political and cultural specificities of their two case studies of physical punishment in Ghana and Ireland.
- <sup>iv</sup> Even issues of translation in cross-cultural research receive limited attention (Evans et al. 2017).
- <sup>v</sup> And see also Jonsson (2010) for further discussion of the difficulties with the term, 'universalism'.
- <sup>vi</sup> As in the psychological notion of 'post-traumatic growth'.
- <sup>vii</sup> This is not to argue for the irrelevance of robust empirical evidence, only that it cannot provide definitive answers.
- <sup>viii</sup> Burman (2016) points out, however, that a Vygotskian theoretical approach to child development may also have its limitations with regard to cross-cultural issues.
- <sup>ix</sup> For discussion of similar normative issues with regard to physical punishment in African childhoods see e.g. Ibrahim and Komulainen 2016, and Twum-Danso Imoh 2013.
- <sup>x</sup> There is a pervasive tendency to characterize 'Western' cultures as individualistic and Asian cultures as 'collectivist' (Choi and Ho 2009). While this certainly points to key issues about understandings of personhood in diverse cultures, this binary characterization also risks oversimplification, obscuring variabilities within Asian and Western cultures (e.g. see Choi and Han 2009; Fevre 2016; Mamat et al. 2014).
- <sup>xi</sup> Such a view is apparent in the unidimensional accounts of some Anglophone social work and mental health perspectives e.g. see <http://fosteringandadoption.rip.org.uk/topics/attachment-theory-research/> and <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/blog/why-relationships-are-so-important-children-and-young-people>
- <sup>xii</sup> And see Cohen (2008) on the significance of the legal doctrine of habeus corpus for the development of Anglophone understandings of individuality.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Nevertheless, issues of what may be common and what may be divergent between care ethics and moral systems apparent in Majority world contexts, are very much matters of ongoing debate (e.g. see Dalmiya 2009; Metz 2013; Wada 2014).

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